

Tips on Preserving Photographs

by Ivan Hanthorn, for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Photographs are one of the most enjoyable forms of documentary evidence of our lives and the lives and activities of friends and loved ones. Like the people whom they record, they are not permanent. The life expectancy of a photograph is very much a consequence of the care and handling it receives.

Tip #1—Storage (in three-part harmony)

1. Each photographic negative and print should have its own enclosure providing physical support and protection. Appropriate envelopes or sleeves can be either archival quality paper or plastic. Paper envelopes are opaque but provide a suitable surface for writing information about the photograph; clear plastic enclosures allow viewing of the photo without directly handling it.
2. Once housed in appropriate folders, sleeves, or envelopes, photographs are usually best stored flat in archival quality boxes.
3. Photos of similar size should be stored together in enclosures that are the same size.

Tip #2—Plastic enclosures. Suitable plastic enclosure materials for photographs are polyester, polypropylene, and polyethylene. (Mylar is a common brand of polyester.) NEVER USE VINYL (polyvinylchloride). Image damage will occur. Do not purchase types not identified, unfortunately many readily available plastic photographic enclosures are made of vinyl.

If you have questions about this tip sheet or other preservation topics, contact:



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Tip #3—Paper enclosures. Use acid-free, archival quality paper envelopes. Either buffered and non-buffered is acceptable. Do not use brown kraft paper, glassine, or colored paper envelopes.

Tip #4—Albums. If you like the album format for arranging important photographs, purchase an archival quality album, that has the paper, page protectors, and a mounting system engineered to protect photographs. Never use what is commonly known as magnetic pages, since the photographs will be harmed by the product's composition. Use paper or Mylar™ photo corners or pre-slotted pages to mount photos in albums; do not use adhesives.

Tip #5—Handling photographs. Carefully hold photo prints and negatives on the edge or wear cotton gloves when handling photos of value. The acids in human skin oils will cause permanent damage over time.

Tip #6—Environment. Keep your photograph collection in the best environment you can provide. Do not store them in attics or basements; cracked image surfaces and mold are among the possible consequences.

Tip #7—Preservation product sources. Obtain appropriate photographic storage materials from businesses that cater to the preservation and archival storage of photographic storage and archival materials. Local photographic or genealogical businesses may carry some of these items.

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